

GUARDED BY GRASS

A RĀMĀYAṆA MOTIF AND SOME WESTERN PARALLELS

The phrase which I have paraphrased in my title, *tṛṇam antara-taḥ kṛtvā*, occurs twice in the Rāmāyaṇa (at 3.54.1c and 5.19.3a) and is copied verbatim by the Mahābhārata in its summary of the story, the *Rāmopākhyāna* (Mbh.3.265.17c). From its stereotyped form in each of these occurrences, we may infer that it alludes to a standard procedure of some kind, despite the absence of this *pāda* elsewhere in the two epics. The literal meaning is not seriously in doubt but what is more problematical is the implication of the action. Some translators have avoided the issue by translating the *pāda* absolutely literally or by omitting it. Examples of literal translation are: « Sita threw a blade of grass between », « placing a blade of grass between herself and Ravana » and « Sita, ... anxious to preserve her virtue, ... placed a straw between Ravana and herself »¹. The phrase is omitted, for example, in Griffith's and Dutt's versions²; although these are abridgements, they might

1. These are taken respectively from P. P. S. SASTRI, *Valmiki Ramayana condensed in the poet's own words*, Madras, 1935, p. 287, MAKHAN LAL SEN, *The Ramayana, A Modernised Version in English Prose*, 3rd edn, Calcutta, n.d., vol. 1, p. 424 (cf. vol. 2, pp. 220-1), and HARI PRASAD SASTRI, *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, 2nd edn, London, 1969, vol. 2, p. 386 (cf. p. 118). So too Kṣemendra (*Rāmāyaṇamañjarī* 5.227d) paraphrases *vidhāya tṛṇam antare*.

2. *Scenes from the Ramayan*, ... by RALPH T. H. GRIFFITH, London, 1868 and *Ramayana, the Epic of Rama Prince of India*, condensed into English verse by ROMESH DUTT, London, 1899.

have been expected to retain anything recognised as significant. Others have rendered it as a mark of Sītā's contempt for Rāvaṇa. Thus, Ganguli translated the *Rāmopākhyāna* occurrence as « regarding him as something less than a straw », while van Buitenen translated it as « counting him no more than a straw in her heart » and paraphrased Rām.3.54.1c with « as though discarding a straw »³.

The commentators on the Rāmāyaṇa generally agree that it is a means for Sītā to ward off the impurity of talking with another man, although the Tilaka commentary also adduces the interpretation as a mark of contempt⁴. This makes of the *tr̥ṇa* a kind of symbolic barrier, while a possibly more literal one is implied in the interpretation, which occurs at least as early as Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas*, that Sītā in some way makes a screen or a curtain of the grass. Besides its occurrence in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, to which I shall revert later, I have also found this explanation in a Hindi commentary on the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa⁵; this may well have been influenced by acquaintance with Tulsīdās, of course, but the commentator evidently saw no incongruity in applying it to the original.

3. *The Mahābhārata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, translated into English Prose [by K. M. Ganguli], published by Protap Chandra Roy, vol. 3.2, Calcutta, 1886, p. 829, *The Mahābhārata*, translated and edited by J. A. B. van Buitenen, vol. 2, Chicago, 1975, p. 741, and *The Literatures of India*, ed. by Edward C. Dimock et al., Chicago, 1974, p. 66.

4. Thus, on 3.54.1, Maheśvaratīrtha comments *antarataḥ kṛtvā madhye kṛtvā sāḁśāt pāpātmakapuruṣasaṁbhāṣaṇadoṣaparihārāyeti*, Govindarāja comments *pativratāyāḥ parapurusaṇi pratyabhīmukhatayā bhāṣaṇāyogāt*, and the Tilaka commentary glosses *tr̥ṇam antarataḥ kṛtvā / sāḁśāt pāpātmakapara-puruṣasaṁbhāṣaṇajadoṣaparihārāyeti śeṣaḥ*; however, the Tilaka commentary on 5.19.3 is fuller: *parapurusaṣya sāḁśāt saṁbhāṣaṇānarhatvāt / bhūmyāṇi kiṁ cid antardhāya mūlādivisarjanavat tr̥ṇāntareṇa tasya mukhe pratyuttara-dānam / ... / etena tr̥ṇīkṛtaprāṇatayā tr̥ṇatulyatayā rāvaṇasya grahaṇāc ca nirbhaya-pratyuttara-dānam iti bodhyam*.

5. *Sṛimadvālmīkīrāmāyaṇa*, hindībhāṣānuvāda sahita, anuvādaḥ caturvedī dvārkaḥprasād śarmā, Ilāhābād, 1927, has the following comment on its 3.56.1: ... *sītā jī ne, tinake kī āḁ kar, nirbhaya ho, rāvaṇ se kahā* (and similarly on 5.21.3). This interpretation was also scornfully dismissed by Ganguli (loc. cit.) in terms which indicate its wide currency: « It is a matter of some surprise that almost all the Bengalee translators have misunderstood the expression, — *Trinamantaratas Kṛitwā*, although it is almost a proverb. Even the Burdwani Pundits, who are generally very careful, have not been correct. There is no difference of reading to be observed in any of the texts. The erroneous rendering to which I allude is, — *Hiding her face behind the grass*».

The notion of a barrier appears on the whole the most plausible and has received support from Western scholars⁶. However, the rationale behind it still seems somewhat obscure but may perhaps be elucidated with the help of some European and Indian parallels.

Before looking at these different interpretations more fully, it would perhaps be well to determine more exactly the meaning and usage of the epic with regard to *tṛṇa*, variously translated in this context as a blade of grass or a straw. There is in fact considerable variation between the two epics, including the *Harivaṃśa*, in the frequency of different nuances, reflecting the differences in their narratives and settings.

Of the twentytwo other occurrences of *tṛṇa* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that I have noted, nearly a quarter are instances of the metaphorical usage to denote something of little or no account (3.31.16d, 4.11.52d, 5.56.71a, 7.10.18c and 60.16b); this is thus the most frequent usage, but only because of the inclusion of two instances from the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. In the *Mahābhārata*, out of a larger total of 40 occurrences noted, this usage accounts for a comparable number (at Mbh.2.41.25cd, 7.125.7c, 158.10d, 8.7.24d and, in the form *tṛṇīkṛtya*, 1.180.2b, 5.148.11b and 7.107.15a) and thus a smaller proportion, while it is absent from the dozen occurrences noted in the *Harivaṃśa*. This usage coincides so nearly with the English expression « not to care a straw » for something that it is hardly surprising that this has been seized on by translators to render this meaning of *tṛṇa*, not only in these passages but also in the phrase under examination. The expression is indeed both widespread and of early origin in English. The earliest instance of its use cited in the Oxford English Dictionary belongs to the end of the thirteenth century, Chaucer used it several times and it has been common ever since. So much so that it has tended to be used in translating phrases of similar import, despite differences in the

6. Thus Renate Söhnen paraphrases as follows: « ... aus der heraus sie den (vor Verunreinigung schützenden) Grashalm als symbolische Grenze zwischen Rāvaṇa (dem Unreinen) und sich selbst (der Reinen) hält (*tṛṇam antarataḥ kṛtvā* 56.1) » (*Untersuchungen zur Komposition von Reden und Gesprächen im Rāmāyaṇa*, Reinbek, 1979, vol. 1, p. 141) and refers back to J. J. Meyer's interpretation of the passage (*Einen Scheidenden bis an ein Wasser begleiten*, in ZII, 7 [1929], pp. 71-88).

literal imagery, such as the Latin *flocci facere* (found in Cicero's speeches but best known from Plautus), where *floccus* is literally a tuft of wool. With such a tradition in translation from the Classics, it is hardly surprising that the phrase was used for such instances as *tr̥ṇais tulyo bhaviṣyati* (Rām.3.31.16d) or *yo 'haṃ na gaṇayāmy etāṃs tr̥ṇānīva narādhipān* (Mbh.2.41.25cd). However, the original Indian image may well have been of grass, as the ubiquitous and thus non-valuable, even if useful, vegetation.

This is suggested by one in particular of the considerable number of instances of its use in the sense of vegetation, especially as fodder. This usage is naturally the dominant one in the *Harivaṃśa* as a result of its pastoral background (occurring at 3.92b, 8.15d, 53.31b,33d, 54.3d,27c, 59.10d,11a,32c), and references to it springing up in the monsoon (54.3d) and to forests as having luxuriant grass (59.32c) emphasise its freshness. The frequency of this meaning in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* is rather less (Mbh.3.182.4b, 7.116.25c^(evat), 13.72.47c(iiic) and 139.5b (iic), Rām.2.18.22d, 61.20b(a-), 106.9b, 3.60.20d(imc) and 6.32.9d). However, in one of these *Sītā* declares that even the eating of grass (*tr̥ṇānām api bhakṣaṇam*, Rām.2.18.22d) is tolerable in order to be with Rāma. Obviously this is not a parallel to Nebuchadnezzar in his madness but an allusion to the meagre, vegetarian diet of the hermits, elsewhere defined as eating roots and fruit, i.e. the natural forest vegetation.

On the other hand, the Indian climate causes such a rapid transition from young and luxuriant growth to old and withered stems that a sharp distinction such as we make between grass and straw is hardly relevant. On the whole we may infer that when *tr̥ṇa* was used as fuel, as commonly in the *Mahābhārata*, it was dry and so approximating to straw, although even here a reference to a grass fire as easily quenched (Mbh.13.90.38b) presumably alludes to the vegetation in situ, though probably dried up⁷. For thatching or building it is almost certainly dry (Mbh.5.47.18a, 12.69.45a, 12.253.21d — by birds — and Hv.53.25d). When used for sitting on

7. The use of *tr̥ṇa* as fuel is found at Mbh. 3.73.12c, 174.22d[1.v.], 5.35.42a[1.v.] 159.9d, 7.87.45d, 12.69.45c (more exactly to its combustibility) and Rām. 5.52.13b (this particular *pāda* occurs only in the Southern recension and *tr̥ṇa* is lacking in the Northern equivalent), also Hv.55.45a.

or as bedding, it is presumably dry when collected and taken indoors but not necessarily so when the reference is in effect to lying on the bare ground. Thus, there is a series of emotive references in the Ayodhyākāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa to Rāma and Sītā sitting or sleeping on *ṭṛṇa*, equally divided between the plural (Rām.2.45.10d = 80.11d) and the singular (Rām.2.81.21b and 82.12d), thus establishing (as is confirmed by other instances) that the singular can be used collectively as well as to denote a single blade or stalk of grass or straw. This is in fact its most frequent use in the Rāmāyaṇa, if the Uttarakāṇḍa is excluded. It is also found occasionally in the Mahābhārata (3.2.52a, 5.26.32a and 12.159.26d).

The commonest single image, however, is that of the well or wells concealed by grass, *ṭṛṇaiḥ kūpa ivāvṛttaḥ* (Rām.3.44.10b, 4.17.18d, Mbh.3.198.54f, 13.147.11b) or slight variants thereof (Rām.5.45.20d[1.v.], Mbh.1.73.18b, 5.39.35b, 9.35.29b, 12.152.16d, 13.33.9c and 69.2d), used as a simile for menace or evil concealed behind an innocent appearance. Whether this derives from grass overgrowing and hiding the edge of a little used well or from a well being deliberately covered with a layer of straw to act as a trap is not directly ascertainable, but the contexts perhaps favour the latter explanation. Similarly, Dundubhi rushes into a cleft concealed by grass (*ṭṛṇair āvṛtaṃ ... vivaram*, Rām.4.9.11ab). Concealment is also the purpose in Bhīma's sarcastic remark about hiding the Himālayas with a single handful of grass (*ṭṛṇnānāṃ muṣṭikenakena himavantam tu parvatam / channam icchasi ...*, Mbh.3.36.22). Another usage comes from its ability to reveal the presence of enemies, when anyone already fearful is said to start at the trembling of grass (Rām.4.53.17c, 6.37.4c and Mbh.7.148.15c; Rām.2.59.6cd is similar).

A unique usage in the Mahābhārata occurs in a listing of those who are not to be killed, which includes one whose mouth is full of grass (Mbh.12.99.47c), apparently as a sign of surrender. This has been the subject of discussion from Pischel to Scharfe, the latter of whom makes a good case for the symbolism as being Indo-European, citing in particular the Roman army passing under the yoke after its defeat at the Caudine Forks (narrated in Livy 9.4-6) and a Homeric reference interpreted as « man-legged oxen»,

i.e. prisoners (*Iliad* 7.475 ἀνδραπόδεσσι)⁸. This is no doubt the origin of the Latin proverbial expression, *dare herbam*, for admitting defeat, which has even for a time passed into English⁹. Fascinating as the implications of this use are however, they are not relevant to the present enquiry, since the last thing Sītā is intending is to surrender to Rāvaṇa. The only point perhaps to be taken from it is that such a definitely symbolic usage is possible.

Not included in the above survey are a few isolated usages of *tṛṇa*: two instances of it denoting an implement for thrusting, i.e. a stiff stalk of straw or grass (Mbh.5.72.7d and 13.149.9c), one occurrence of *tṛṇarāja* to denote a type of tree (Mbh.4.38.7b), the well-known episode at Kṛṣṇa's death when blades of grass become clubs (Mbh.16.4.38a), and grass along with trees being shaken by Indra's storms (Hv.61.19d).

Although the phrase *tṛṇam antarataḥ kṛtvā* appears standardised and even proverbial, there does not seem to be much trace of it in other texts. Even in the Rāmāyaṇa, the manuscript support for it is not complete, since at 3.54.1c one manuscript, D1, has the variant reading *tṛṇamātram ataḥ kṛtvā*, and for 5.19.3a the relevant passage is absent in the whole of the NE recension, except B4, which reads *tṛṇavac ca tataḥ kṛtvā*; both these variants, it should be noted, tend to support the interpretation of the *tṛṇa* as an expression of contempt but they may well be more in the nature of glosses than genuine variants. By contrast, no variants are recorded at Mbh.3.265.17c and this is perhaps the strongest testimony to its occurrence in precisely this form in the Rāmāyaṇa¹⁰.

8. RICHARD FISCHER, *Ins Gras beißen*, in « Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften », 1908, pp. 445-64 and HARTMUT SCHARFE, *Oxen with Men's Feet*, in « Journal of Indo-European Studies », 6 (1978), pp. 212-24; other contributions to the debate include H. OLDENBERG, *Zu Suttanipāta 440*, in ZDMG, 62 (1908), pp. 593-4 and F. OTTO SCHRADER, *Esa muñjam parihare*, in JRAS, 1930, pp. 107-9 (repr. *Kleine Schriften*, Wiesbaden, 1983, pp. 325-7).

9. Thus the Oxford English Dictionary cites « Needs me give grasse unto the conquerors » Hall *Sat.*, *Defiance to Enmuie* 105, which dates from 1597-8 A.D.

10. On the relationship between the Rāmāyaṇa and the Rāmopākhyāna see my article *Sanskrit Epic Tradition I. Epic and Epitome (Rāmāyaṇa and Rāmopākhyāna)*, in « Indologica Taurinensia », 6 (1978), pp. 79-111 and the secondary literature there cited, to which may now be added BAREND A. VAN NOOTEN, *The Rāmopākhyāna and the Rāmāyaṇa*, in « Indologica Taurinensia », 8-9 (1980-81), pp. 293-305, and the unpublished paper by RENATE SÖHNEN, *Die Rāma-Erzählung im Mahābhārata*.

However, the incident is absent or at any rate not stressed at all in most later Rāmāyaṇas. One exception is in Tulsīdās' *Rāmcarit-mānas* where, though lacking from the Araṇyakāṇḍa, it occurs in the Sundarakāṇḍa as *tṛṇa dhari oṭa kahati baidehī* (Do 8, Caupāi 3), which certainly seems to suggest a definite screen, even if only symbolic¹¹. In preserving this detail, Tulsīdās has here stayed close to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, as he has also done in the episode where Lakṣmaṇa commits Sītā to the care of all the forest deities before departing to assist Rāma against Mārīca (Rām.3.43.30cd, RCM Araṇya Do 35, Caupāi 3).

Lakṣmaṇa's invocation to the forest deities seems to be the starting point for the episode where Lakṣmaṇa draws a line or a magic circle round Sītā before leaving, which is found in many later Rāmāyaṇas. That in turn is presumably the basis for the notion that Rāvaṇa dare not or cannot touch Sītā as he abducts her and so lifts ground and all, although this idea is actually attested somewhat earlier¹². However, it is at least a possibility that these more elaborate ideas have arisen from a conflation of Lakṣmaṇa's invocation with Sītā's placing the *tṛṇa*, despite the interval separating these actions in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. A small pointer in this direction is the fact that in one manuscript only (D3) the phrase *tṛṇam antarataḥ kṛtvā* is also used in relation to Rāvaṇa's first approach to Sītā immediately after Lakṣmaṇa's departure (3.871*1 pr. inserted into 3.45), rather than as part of her captivity in the Aśokavana.

11. Nevertheless W. D. P. Hill (*The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rāma*, Bombay 1952, p. 343) prefers to interpret *tṛṇa* as a single blade, «Hiding her face with a blade of grass», and Charlotte Vaudeville (*Étude sur les sources et la composition du Rāmāyaṇa de Tulsī-Dās*, Paris, 1955, p. 222) appears to favour the contempt explanation since she renders the phrase «Vaidehī, brisant un brin d'herbe». Śyām Sundar Dās, from whose edition (Allahabad, 1922) I quote, in his commentary explains it first in terms of *purdah*.

12. Lakṣmaṇa draws a magic line round Sītā in the Khotanese version (probably 9th. century) and in the *Ānanda*, *Bhuṣuṇḍi* and *Tattvasaṃgraha Rāmāyaṇas*, the Telugu *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa* and the Malay *Hikāyat Sṛī Rāma*. Rāvaṇa does not touch Sītā directly in the Tibetan version (8th.-9th. century), Kampan's *Irāmāvatāram* (9th.-12th. centuries), Guṇabhadra's *Uttara-purāṇa* (9th. century), and also the *Tattvasaṃgraha Rāmāyaṇa* and the Lao *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. For further details, cf. my *Righteous Rāma*, Delhi, 1984, chapters 8-9.

This hypothesis would lend weight to the suggestion that Sītā is symbolically placing a barrier between herself and Rāvaṇa, rather than expressing contempt for him, although the two are not necessarily exclusive. It appears that the only other literary reference to this custom is in the *Dūtavākya* ascribed to Bhāsa in which Duryodhana's declaration that he will not give so much as a *ṭṛṇa* of his kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas is followed immediately by the following exchange:

Vāsudeva: *bho kurukulakalaṅkabhūta ayaśolubdhā vayaṃ kila ṭṛṇāntarābhibhāṣakāḥ.*

Duryodhana: *bho gopālaka ṭṛṇāntarābhibhāṣyo bhavān.*

Thus Duryodhana's use of *ṭṛṇa* as a symbol of insignificance is taken up by Kṛṣṇa and turned into a symbol of separation¹³. This passage shows similarity to the Rāmāyaṇa incident in consisting of negotiations but marked dissimilarity in the absence of the sexual element. The probably early date of this work compared to most Classical Sanskrit literature perhaps indicates that employment of this symbol fell into disuse and so its significance was lost.

However, Meyer in his discussion of the Rāmāyaṇa phrase, after dismissing the view of *ṭṛṇa* as a symbol of contempt, asserts that Sītā is simply isolating herself from impurities and cites in support this *Agni Purāṇa* verse:

*udakaṃ ca ṭṛṇaṃ bhasma dvāraṃ panthās tathaiva ca ebhir antaritaṃ kṛtvā paṅktidoṣo na vidyate*¹⁴. 166.21

This would imply that grass or straw has the same magical properties as water in protecting against evil forces but without indi-

13. *Dūtavākya*, verse 35 and following prose. T. Ganapati Sastri's commentary in his edition (Trivandrum, 1918) is chiefly notable for the fact that he actually employs the phrase in question in what is essentially merely a paraphrase: *bho ityādi / ṭṛṇena antaraṃ vyavadhānaṃ yeṣāṃ abhibhāṣyeṇa saha te ṭṛṇāntarāḥ, ṭṛṇāntarāḥ santo 'bhibhāṣakāḥ ṭṛṇāntarābhibhāṣakāḥ ṭṛṇam antarataḥ kṛtvāiva tvam asmākaṃ abhibhāṣyo na sāksād ity abhiprāyaḥ.*

14. J. J. MEYER, *Einen Scheidenden bis an ein Wasser begleiten*, in ZII, 7 (1929), pp. 71-88; Meyer's article amplifies an earlier one with the same title by Theodor Zachariae (ZII, 5 (1927), pp. 228-40), who gives various examples of accompanying a departing guest as far as a stream or river and cites with approval Pischel's explanation (op. cit.) that evil spirits follow someone starting a journey, so that one must accompany him in order to protect him as far as the running water which they cannot cross. Belief in the efficacy of running water against evil forces is of course by no means confined to India.

cating the mechanism involved. In the case of grass or straw — and the use of straw as a prophylactic against witches is attested from both Europe and America¹⁵ — I would like to suggest that it is possibly as a symbol for the earth, from which it springs so directly. We may remember Sītā's intimate connections with the Earth.

The custom of accompanying a guest to water evidently stayed alive. Among the examples cited by Zachariae is one from Kālidāsa's *Sakuntalā* where Śārṅgarava remarks to Kaṇva as they comfort the departing *Sakuntalā* that it is usual so to do¹⁶. Kālidāsa's readiness to employ such traditional beliefs is in evidence also in a verse from the *Raghuvamśa* which has caused some difficulties to its interpreters. This is

*pitrā viśr̥ṣṭāṃ madapekṣayā yaḥ śriyaṃ yuvāpy aṅkagatām
abhoktā*

iyanti varṣāṇi tayā sahograh abhyasyatīva vratam āsidhāram.

13.67

Rāma is describing to Sītā the faithfulness with which Bharata has kept the kingdom in trust for him until his return. Mallinātha sees a definite sexual imagery here and quotes Yādava's *Kośa* (i.e. the 11th-century *Vaijayanī*) that, when a young man behaves with a young woman like an infatuated husband and refrains from intercourse, that is the vow of the sword-blade, while Mallinātha himself adds that it is so called because it is like walking about on a sword-blade¹⁷. Dinakara is much more direct: « Where a man and woman lie in chastity on a single bed with a sword placed in the middle, that is the vow of the sword-blade »¹⁸. Such an interpreta-

15. Cf. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, 7 vols., Durham N. C., 1952, vol. 1, p. 650 (similar is the use of a broom, i.e. a bundle of twigs, to keep witches away cf. pp. 645 and 653), MABEL PEACOCK, *Folk-lore of Lincolnshire*, in « Folk-lore », 12 (1901), pp. 161-80, esp. p. 176, and WILLIAM HENDERSON, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders*, London, 1879, p. 181.

16. *Sakuntalā* Act 4 immediately after verse 17 (ed. R. Pischel [Harvard Oriental Series 16] 2nd edn., Cambridge Mass., 1922, p. 53); ZACHARIAE, *op. cit.*

17. « yuvā yuvatyā sārḍham yan mugdhabhartṛvad ācaret / antarnivṛtta-saṅgaḥ syād āsidhāravratam hi tat » iti yādavaḥ / idaṃ cāsidhārācamkramaṇa-tulyatvād āsidhāravratam ity uktam //

18. *ekasyām eva śayyāyāṃ madhye khaḍgaṃ nidhāya śṛpumsau yatra brahmācaryeṇa śayāte tad āsidhāravratam.*

tion would make this passage a striking parallel to the European motif of the separating sword, as Stenzler first pointed out almost a century ago¹⁹.

However, I have not seen any connection made between this *asidhārāvratā* and the Rāmāyaṇa phrase with which I began²⁰. Yet, the use of *ṭṛṇa* (in that case probably a blade of grass) as specifically a guardian of her chastity fits Sītā's situation far more precisely than any other explanation. While we may perhaps assume a likeness between a blade of grass or straw and a sword, the possibility that a clump or handful is meant need not be ruled out, especially in view of the chthonic associations of both it and Sītā. Other objects may be used in mediaeval literature elsewhere by a woman anxious to repel unwelcome sexual advances. In romances as diverse as the eleventh-century Persian poet Gurgānī's *Vīs o Rāmīn* and the slightly later Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*, the heroines make use of a talisman and a silken belt respectively to preserve their chastity, while in Eilhart's twelfth-century Middle High German *Tristrant*, Isalde advises her maid Gymele to give Kehenis a pillow which will send him into a deep sleep and thereby frustrate his desire²¹.

Other mediaeval resemblances to this motif are perhaps more apparent than real. The modern reader may think immediately of the sword which separates the two lovers in the Tristran stories, and is interpreted by the vengeful Mark as a sign of their chastity, but the origin of this scene is complicated: Heller traces it back

19. ADOLF FR. STENZLER, *Das Schwertklingen-Gelübde der Inder*, in ZDMG, 40 (1886), pp. 523-5. Stenzler himself cites JACOB GRIMM, *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer*, p. 168, and K. WEINHOLD, *Die deutschen Frauen im Mittelalter*, 1, 348 and 2, 9 for European examples of the sword of chastity.

20. Certainly, there is no suggestion of it made in H. KERN, *Beteekenis en oorsprong van't Asidhārāvratam der Indiërs*, in « Verslagen en Mededeelingen der Kon. Ned. Akademie van Amsterdam », 4 (1904), pp. 23-30.

21. *Vis and Ramin*, translated from the Persian of Fakhr ud-Dīn Gurgānī by George Morrison, New York and London, 1972, p. 71, *Boeve de Haumtone*, ed. A. Stimming (Halle, 1899) and DANIELLE BUSCHINGER, *Le Tristrant d'Eilhart von Oberg*, 2 vols., Paris, 1975, pp. 181-5. I am particularly indebted to my wife, Mary Brockington, for the collection and analysis of the European and other parallels, as well as for her assistance in the overall preparation of this paper. She is planning a fuller treatment of this material elsewhere.

to Indian sources²². He demonstrates that the interposition of an object between a sleeping couple as a symbolic or actual barrier to intercourse is widespread throughout India and Europe, often surviving in folk-tales. The object is usually a naked sword, but may be other metal objects such as scissors, lance or cattle-goad (the use of metal as a protection against fairies is a deeply-rooted superstition); occasionally other objects such as a sheet or a plank are used, and once, in an Italian song, a blade of straw²³. An interesting feature of these traditions is that the couple are usually legally married, and that the abstinence is voluntary on the part of one if not both partners. Incidentally, we know that the device of the separating sword was actually employed in a fifteenth-century marriage by proxy²⁴.

From this popular tradition the separating sword seems to have passed into ancient folk-tales and early literature in many countries, including the Germanic stories of Sigurd, Brynhild and Gunnar. It gained its widest distribution in the folk-tale known as *The Two Brothers*, and is represented in mediaeval literature by the many romances linked to the Old French *chanson de geste* *Amis et Amiles*. In both these traditions, one hero finds himself obliged, as a test of his loyalty, to sleep beside the wife of his identical twin brother (or friend); the wife is ignorant of the substitution, and so the hero uses his sword to repel her (innocently-motivated) advances and to reinforce his own resolve.

This theme appears in the Tristran stories in an altogether more developed — indeed more cynical — form: accidental in the earlier versions, the placing of the sword is in the later versions a deliberate act of deception, although we (and Mark) already know that the lovers are guilty of adultery — and both equally so. Mark's

22. B. HELLER, *L'Épée symbole et gardienne de chasteté*, in « Romania », 36 (1907), pp. 36-49 and 37 (1908), pp. 162-3.

23. The popular song usually called *Il Pellegrino* (FERRARO, *Canti Monferrini*, no. 76; WOLF, *Volkslieder aus Venetien*, no. 95), cited by PJO RAJNA, *Le origini dell'epopea francese*, Firenze, 1884, p. 406 n. 8.

24. MACEDWARD, ed., *Amis and Amiloun* (Early English Texts Society OS 203), London, 1937, p. xlv.

reaction, however, testifies to the common acceptance of the naked separating sword as a symbol of chastity at least by the twelfth century.

In the seventeenth-century Irish story of the elopement of Diarmaid and Grainne, Diarmaid refuses to consummate the union during part, if not all, of their flight from Grainne's vengeful husband Finn. This element of the story seems to have been of little interest to the authors of the earliest texts, but assumes much greater importance in later oral versions, where we are told specifically that the couple sleep apart; one late Scottish version introduces the motif of the separating sword, while in one other it is a cold stone which Diarmaid uses to protect himself from Grainne's unwelcome advances²⁵. The use of a stone may be due to the prevalence of magic stones of various significance in Irish legend²⁶. The stone is of course particularly associated with the earth and as such may be linked with ideas of appeals to the earth in support of statements of the truth, such as Sītā makes in the Uttarakāṇḍa²⁷. A linking of the two symbols of the stone and the sword is found in the story of Arthur pulling the sword from the stone, which prompts the speculation that in this episode the stone may in fact be as significant as the sword.

There are differences between these European versions of the separating sword and the use by Sītā of the grass to interpose be-

25. THE MARQUIS OF LORNE, *Adventures in Legend*, London, 1898, p. 22, and JOHN GREGORSON CAMPBELL, *The Fians*, London, 1891, p. 56.

26. As examples of this, one may note the motif of the stone which contains a man's life in the *Scéla Cano Meic Gartnán* (The Story of Cano son of Gartnán) and *Tochmarc Treblainne* (The Wooing of Treblann), the stone on which Deirdre dashes out her brains in *Longes mac nUsnig* (The Exile of the Sons of Usnach), the flagstone on which Curithir prayed, on which Liadain subsequently lived and under which she was buried in *Comrac Liadaine ocus Chuirithir* (The Meeting of Liadain and Curithir), and the stone of destiny which screamed under the feet of the true king of Ireland in various tales; the last of these has analogies with the Stone of Scone, the Scottish coronation stone.

27. There is of course in the Tristran story the notorious episode of Iseult's deceptive use of a truth act, as it has been termed from comparisons with the Indian tradition, but this is not in fact relevant to our purposes. However, in the Irish tradition there are also references to swearing on a stone and to a stone of truth on which anyone standing must utter the truth.

tween herself and Rāvaṇa. The main one is that it is Sītā who takes the initiative rather than the man, but this is after all necessary to the main plot of the Rāmāyaṇa and there are various other instances of Sītā taking a more active and independent role than might usually be expected. Equally, as a woman and by this stage Rāvaṇa's captive, she would not have access to a sword as readily as Tristran or Amis/Amiles. In these circumstances, the substitution for the sword of some other object, for which we have seen that there are ample parallels elsewhere, is only to be expected. The physical similarity of a blade of grass to a sword could well then be a contributory factor in its choice, as well as its well-attested use as a prophylactic in other contexts. The use of the separating sword motif is a continuing one in the Indian tradition, though not perhaps as well known as it might be. Whatever one may think of the *Raghuvamśa* verse, there is no doubt that Dina-kara in the fourteenth century interpreted it in terms of this concept, while it is also the most intelligible interpretation of Yādava-prakāśa's definition, which belongs to the eleventh century. References in the *Pañcatantra* and the *Kathāsaritsāgara* probably derive from an earlier period still; the latter is particularly interesting since it is the wife, Somaprabhā, who is insisting on maintaining her chastity²⁸. From more modern times there come the Kashmiri tale of the two-edged sword laid between the couple sleeping

28. F. EDGERTON, *The Panchatantra Reconstructed* (New Haven, 1924) 3 (261) *meghavarna āha: asidhārāvrataṃ iva, (manye,) ariṇā saha saṁvāsah*, translated 'Cloud-color said: « Like the task of [standing on] the blade of a sword (I ween) is association with an enemy »'; cf. its repetition at 3(263). Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* (ed. Durgāprasād and Kāśināth Pāṇḍurang Parab, 2nd edn., Bombay, 1903) 17.91 / 3.3.91 *tataś cānupabhuñjāno bhāryāṃ tām gṛhavartinīm / śiṣeva guhacandro 'sāv āsidhāram iva vrataṃ //*. Among various references to the sword-blade, *asidhārā*, one in the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (ed. J. Varenne, Paris, 1960, verse 200) alludes to the difficulty of balancing on a sword-blade placed over a pit presumably by a juggler or acrobat. This or a similar passage must have prompted the use of *asidhārāvrata* to denote an exceptionally difficult task in an epigram attributed to Bhartṛhari (*The Epigrams attributed to Bhartṛhari*, ed. by D. D. Kosambi, Singhi Jain Series 23, Bombay, 1948, No. 275).

together and the similar practice attested for the Rajputs of South Bihar²⁹.

The range of meanings of *tṛṇa* and the variety of its metaphorical or symbolic uses make it hazardous to be too dogmatic about any one passage. Nevertheless, I think that it is clear that the frequent interpretation of the Rāmāyaṇa phrase as indicating Sītā's contempt for Rāvaṇa is inadequate as an explanation of her action, especially since the precise turn of phrase used is not consonant with this view; indeed, despite its frequency in the Indian tradition, it is doubtful whether it would have caught on were it not for the resonances with English idiom. Altogether more plausible is the view that Sītā is placing a barrier between them — a barrier which, since taken literally it is nugatory, can only be understood symbolically. The limitation with the view that it expresses the belief that, like running water, grass protects against evil forces is that Sītā's reactions to Rāvaṇa throughout are based on his being human rather than demonic; he is not a wizard to be warded off but a very real suitor to be repelled. Equally this view will not fit the *Dūtavākya* incident, where Kṛṣṇa and Duryodhana are seen very much as equals. If then Sītā is erecting a barrier to unwelcome sexual advances, the motif of the separating sword could well be relevant, and the idea that the *tṛṇa* here represents a variant of it deserves serious consideration.

29. The first of these is listed in S. THOMPSON and J. BALYS, *The Oral Tales of India*, Bloomington, 1958, under type T 351 as being documented in W. NORMAN BROWN, *Tawi Tales* (ms. in Indiana University Library) n. 67. The second is noted in SARAT CHANDRA MITRA, *Note on the sword-blade vow*, in «Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay», 6 (1901), pp. 115-23, which suggest the custom on the basis of a ballad current in Shāhābād District (Mitra's article is intended to add a modern example to those given in E. REHATSEK, *On religious injunctions and personal vows with respect to sexual abstinence*, in «Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay», 1 (1887), pp. 199-202, which, so far as the Indian material is concerned, simply reproduces that of Stenzler's article cited at fn. 19).